

Alcohol Effects and Safe Drinking Habits

Alcohol and the Body

Absorption:

Alcohol is absorbed quickly into the bloodstream through the stomach wall and small intestine. The rate of absorption of alcohol into the bloodstream is related to several factors. Higher concentrations of alcohol (e.g., vodka) are absorbed faster than lower concentrations (e.g., beer). Absorption is faster for a person who weighs less due to a lower volume of blood in their body. When you have eaten recently and there is still food in the stomach, the absorption of alcohol will be slower than if you drink on an empty stomach.

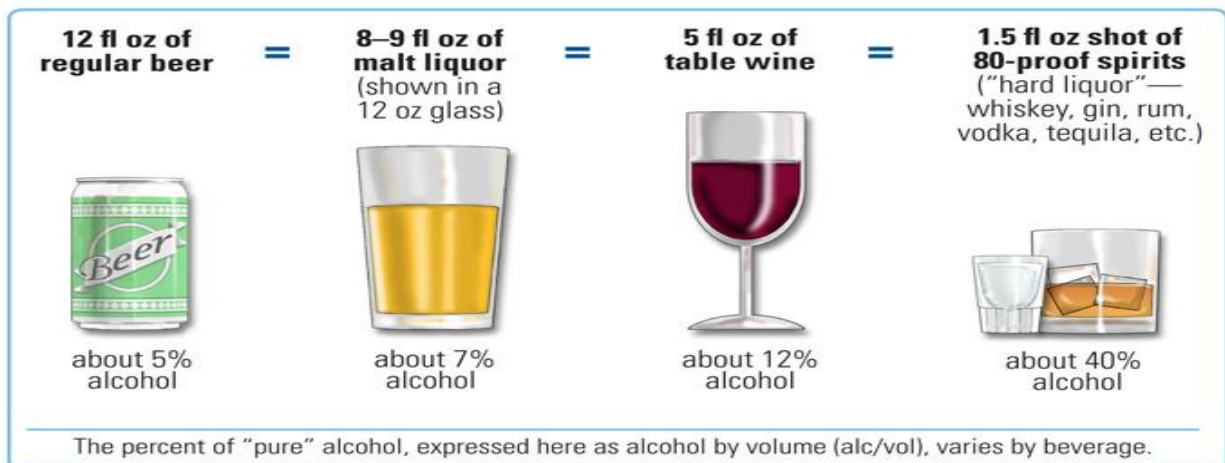
Excretion:

Alcohol leaves your body in several ways. Ninety percent (90%) is removed from the blood in the liver. The final 10% is expelled through sweat and breath. The liver can only process about one drink (e.g., a 12 ounce beer) per hour.

Tolerance:

Over time, a person who drinks regularly has to drink more to feel the same effect as they did when they first began drinking (this is known as developing an alcohol "tolerance"). People develop tolerance because they have adapted both physically and psychologically to having alcohol in their system. Individuals with alcohol tolerance are able to keep high levels of toxins in their bodies for long periods of time which increases stress on sensitive internal organs and increases the chances of developing long-term health problems. You can decrease tolerance (and the associated health risks) by decreasing the quantity and frequency of drinking or taking a break from the alcohol for a few weeks.

A standard drink of alcohol:



Alcohol Intoxication and Performance

Sleep:

Alcohol negatively affects your sleep. Poor sleep limits your ability to think and respond quickly which reduces your ability to perform well. It is true that alcohol may help someone fall asleep quickly. However, the sleep is usually disturbed and fragmented after just a few hours. Alcohol compromises the sleep cycle throughout the night and often leads to feeling tired and unrefreshed the next day.

Biphasic Response of Alcohol in Your Body:

The biphasic response refers to two physical phases, or sets of effects, that alcohol produces. Feeling stimulated or excited is characteristic of the initial phase. This is followed by the depressant effects, such as feeling tired. At first, one might feel a surge of energy or good mood as a result of the alcohol's growing intoxication effects or increased amount of alcohol in the blood.

However, as blood alcohol levels (BAL) begin to fall one then experiences the negative depressant effects of alcohol. This is the time when people begin to drink more in an attempt to get back their initial enjoyable effect. The more alcohol that is consumed the greater both the arousal and the depressant effects will be. At some point, the stimulating effects will not amount to the same positive effect initially experienced. The point at which an increase in BAL doesn't lead to an elevated mood or energy is known as **the point of diminishing returns**. For most people, that point is a BAL of .05.

BAL Effects of Alcohol on the Body

.02%	Light to moderate drinkers begin to feel some effect
.04%	Most people begin to feel relaxed
.06%	Judgment is somewhat impaired; people are less able to make rational decisions about their capabilities (e.g., driving)
.08%	Definite impairment of muscle coordination and driving skills. Increased risk of nausea and slurred speech. Legal intoxication.
.10%	Clear deterioration of reaction time and control.
.15%	Balance and movement are impaired. Risk of blackouts and accidents.
.30%	Many people lose consciousness. Risk of death.
.45%	Breathing stops, death occurs.

Moderating Your Drinking

Decide what you want from drinking alcohol: Think about the pros and cons (short and long-term) for moderating your use versus maintaining your usual drinking behavior. Also consider what you absolutely want to avoid when you drink.

Set drinking limits:

- What's your upper limit on the number of drinks you consume per week?
- At what point do you decide you've had enough (consider a BAL limit)?
- What's the maximum number of days for drinking you will choose to give yourself?
- Would you like to decrease the size of your drinks (using standard guidelines to determine what constitutes one drink)?

Count your drinks and monitor your drinking behavior:

Try it! Most people are surprised by what they learn when they actually count how much they drink. Simply observe your behavior – this is like standing outside yourself and watching how you are acting when you are drinking. Some people put the bottle caps in their pockets while drinking to monitor how many beers they have had. You can also make tick marks with a pen on a napkin to monitor the number of drinks.

Alter how and what you drink:

- Switch to drinks that contain less alcohol (e.g., light beers)
- Slow down your pace of drinking
- Space drinks further apart
- Alternate drinking nonalcoholic beverages with alcoholic drinks

Manage your drinking in the moment:

- Stay awake and on top of how you drink and what you're drinking when you're at a party
- Choose what's right for you and ask a close friend to help you monitor (preferably the friend that doesn't think being drunk is cool)

**Safe drinking guideline:

- For women, no more than 2 standard drinks a day on most days; and no more than 10 drinks/week
- For men, no more than 3 standard drinks a day on most days; no more than 15 drinks/week